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CAPITOL SPOTLIGHT
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"SOCIAL SECURITY: IT COULD HAVE BEEN WORSE"

The Social Security Bill passed by the House of Representatives was worse than I had hoped, but better than I feared. I think Americans worried about their retirement income will be able to breathe a lot easier once the bill has passed the Senate and been signed into law by President Reagan. There are aspects of the bill which I fought against and still consider extremely undesirable. I am especially unhappy about the vote to raise the retirement age to 67. Despite the fact that this change is to take place over a long period of time, I very much hoped that it would not be adopted.

I strongly object to the basic notion that 67 year-old people are going to be very different in the year 2027 than they are today. The age change was presented by Congressman J.J. Pickle of Texas, based on two dubious assumptions. Rep. Pickle argued that people would be living much longer 40 years from now; and that the aging process would set in at a later age than it does now.

As Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Health and the Environment, I have had the opportunity to review the latest research on aging and to speak with top medical experts on life expectancy. Though there is no consensus, the majority of experts believe we are close to reaching the maximum life expectancy biologically possible. Hopefully, advances in medicine will make our senior years healthier and more enjoyable. Few experts believe that the life expectancy of Americans will leap from the seventies to the nineties or even eighties.

My congressional opponents argued repeatedly that we ought not make a big fuss over "a mere two years". This argument did not impress me. The change in age not only affects routine retirement, but also has devastating consequences for workers who want to choose early retirement. As spokesmen against the Pickle amendment pointed out, the vast majority of early retirees are not retiring to pursue leisure and recreation. They are retiring because they find the burden of work beyond their physical or mental endurance.

I was tremendously moved by congressmen from the coal mining states of Kentucky and West Virginia and the representatives of heavy industry in the Great Lakes region. They spoke of men and women who

stagger from their last day at work to their first day in retirement with bodies broken by decades of hard and dangerous labor. A sentence of "two years additional hard labor" is no trivial matter for those who do the heavy manual labor which will still be a part of our economy 40 years from now.

I did not vote for the final Social Security bill. Once it was clear to me that the measure would pass overwhelmingly, I felt a moral obligation to register a "no" vote in protest against key provisions of the bill I feel are unfair to future retirees.

Ironically, credit for solving the Social Security Crisis will probably go to President Reagan. He will undoubtedly preside over a grand bill signing ceremony. The real credit for the fact that the bill is as good as it is belongs to millions of citizens who bombarded their congressmen with pleas not to cut Social Security. The men responsible for the numerous sound provisions in the bill are the House Democratic leadership--especially our Speaker, Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill--and the oldest and one of the brightest and most dedicated members of Congress, Rep. Claude Pepper of Florida. Were it not for Rep. Claude Pepper's energy, persistence and unwaivering commitment to senior citizens, we would have gotten a much worse bill or no bill at all.

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